

Women Veterans Peer Counseling Enhancement Act

Sponsored by Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Sen. Joni Ernst (R-IA)

Background

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Peer Support Program currently employs more than 1,000¹ peer specialists (peer counselors) in VA health care facilities and Community Based Outpatient Clinics around the nation, who are trained to help veterans manage and overcome mental health conditions, substance use disorders, homelessness, and other challenges. Peer counselors in the VA's Peer Support Program are veterans themselves, and therefore can relate in profound ways to the mental health challenges facing our veterans.

Women veterans rely on the VA Peer Support Program and face significant mental health challenges. According to the VA, "About 16 percent of [peer counselors] are women. And we're very supportive of growing that because it benefits veterans. Veterans who interact with peers are more likely to seek care when they need it and to have a better experience with the care team."² A 2016 VA [report](#) on veterans' mental health found that the "risk for suicide was 2.5 times higher among female veterans when compared with U.S. civilian adult women."³ Furthermore, the VA has observed, "Women veterans who experienced military sexual trauma, who have mental health conditions, and/or who are at risk of becoming homeless face numerous barriers in seeking and accessing assistance, including through VA. Such women veterans are considered to be among VA's most clinically complex patients."⁴ Altogether, there is a demonstrable need for the VA to increase the number of peer counselors, particularly those with expertise in issues affecting women veterans.

Legislation

To ensure that the VA's Peer Support Program is equipped with an adequate amount of peer counselors to help address the mental health needs of women veterans, the *Women Veterans Peer Counseling Enhancement Act*:

- Directs the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure that the VA hires a sufficient number of peer specialists (peer counselors) providing mental health counseling services to women veterans.
- Recommends that peer counselors may be VA employees and may have expertise in: a) gender-specific issues, b) informing veterans about VA-administered services and benefits, and c) securing employment.
- Requires the VA Secretary to emphasize the availability of peer counseling for women veterans who suffered sexual trauma while serving in military, endure post-traumatic stress disorder or other mental health condition, or are at risk of homelessness.
- Instructs the VA Secretary to conduct outreach to inform women veterans about the VA's Peer Support program and the types of assistance offered under the program.

¹ Data provided by the VA to Sens. Warren and Ernst upon request, current as of Jan. 17, 2018.

² Testimony of Jennifer Lee, Deputy VA Undersecretary for Health for Policy and Services, Veterans Health Administration, before the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, May 17, 2017.

³ <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/2016suicidedatareport.pdf>.

⁴ <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/VA%20Lee%20Testimony%205.17.17v2.pdf>.

- Directs the VA Secretary to work with community organizations, state and local governments, school systems, business groups, legal aid groups, and other appropriate entities to support women veterans' transition to civilian life.

Rep. Mike Coffman (R-CO) and Rep. Elizabeth Esty (D-CT) introduced the original legislation (H.R. 4635) in the House of Representatives on December 13, 2017.

Endorsements

- The American Legion
- Veterans of Foreign Wars
- Paralyzed Veterans of America
- Disabled American Veterans
- Wounded Warrior Project